



United States Department of the Interior

National Park Service
Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks
47050 Generals Highway
Three Rivers, California 93271-9651



IN REPLY REFER TO:

July 1, 1999

Dear Three Rivers Resident,

My name is Jody Lyle and I am the Fire Information Officer for Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks. I would like to offer you some information about the upcoming fire season, as well as the results of the fire survey your household completed last fall.

Summer is just beginning but fire managers in the parks have been preparing for fire season for many months. Our permanent staff spent the winter and spring writing prescribed burn plans, analyzing data collected in research plots, and following weather trends in order to predict conditions for this summer. The El Niño year of 1998, which brought our area almost twice its annual precipitation, contrasts sharply with the current drier year. Across Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks in 1999, we have had only 60-70% of our area's average precipitation.

During June, we trained approximately 65 seasonal fire employees who will work in crews throughout these parks. For example, we have five wildland fire engines (16 people), a helitack crew (4 people), a hotshot crew (20 people), a prescribed fire crew (13 people), a fire monitoring crew (4 people), a fire effects crew (5 people), and miscellaneous support positions including fire dispatchers. These newly formed crews had their first opportunity to meet and begin building strong teams this month and are looking forward to working hard this summer.

Prescribed Burn Projects for 1999

This summer, we are planning up to 14 prescribed burn projects, totaling approximately 8,400 acres. As you know, the completion of these burns depends on weather, fuel moistures, air quality, and the availability of crews. It is not likely that all projects will get done. If not, they will carry over into next year. Enclosed is a map showing the 1999 burn areas with descriptions of each location. As dates for ignitions of individual burns are set, I will post them on town bulletin boards, the internet (address on next page), and in the Kaweah Commonwealth.

Of particular interest to Three Rivers residents are the plans for eight burns in Kaweah River drainages: three in the Marble Fork, one in the Middle Fork, and four in the East Fork. Out of many possible projects each year, the park prioritizes burns and analyzes their potential cumulative effects on areas like Three Rivers. As a result, we are postponing burning in the North and South Forks in order to work on these Middle, Marble and East Fork projects.

Lightning fires are similar to prescribed burns since both fires benefit the forest while putting smoke in the air. If we allow a natural fire to burn, the smoke that results might create unfavorable air quality and prevent us from completing important prescribed burns. Which kind of fire is more important? For the summer of 1999, prescribed fires will take priority over natural fires in the Kaweah Middle Fork drainage. This means the park will suppress all lightning ignitions below 8,000 feet in the Middle Fork. This experiment in balancing smoke from lightning fires and prescribed burns began in 1997 and will be reevaluated next year.

Fire Survey Results

I want to personally thank you for responding to the fire management survey last fall. This information is valuable as we move into the future and improve our fire program. During the winter, Paul Schissler Associates in Bellingham, Washington analyzed the 530 survey responses and submitted a final report to park managers. Enclosed you will find a 5-page summary of this report, also prepared by the Schissler consulting firm. Complete reports may be obtained by writing to me at the park or by calling me at the number below.

The survey reinforces a few things that we already suspected. For example, most of you visit the park regularly and were attracted to this area by its beautiful natural setting. You also believe that the best things about fire management are the reduced risk of catastrophic fires, improved forest health, wildlife benefits, and the dedication of firefighters and managers. We appreciate your confidence in our staff and program objectives.

The survey, however, also provides some new information about smoke management and community outreach. Sixty-four percent of respondents said they had experienced smoke-related discomfort at some time in the past, but most say that they have not experienced smoke effects in the last year. This coincides with the recent fire history in our area since the last major fire that put smoke in Three Rivers was three years ago, the Castle Fire of 1996. Smoke is not pleasant and I know that the memories are lasting, but it is encouraging to see that 67% of respondents do not believe that all fires should be suppressed because smoke is bad for the community. A majority of you believe that the benefits of some burning outweigh these disturbances.

Community outreach is another important issue that came out in the survey. Only one-quarter of respondents feel well-informed about prescribed burns and ongoing fires throughout the season. As the park Fire Information Officer, I want to increase this number but I need your help. Since we live in a town with a weekly newspaper, it is difficult to disseminate fire information that changes rapidly, sometimes hourly. I am counting on you to know where to go for details so we can prevent rumors and misinformation.

Where to Find Information

If you have internet access, you can visit <http://fire.nifc.nps.gov/fire/seki/amreport.htm>. This site is updated daily with weather, air district burn days, crew assignments, and fire narratives. Press releases and updates are posted as needed on bulletin boards next to the Village Market, the Totem, Three Rivers Market, and the Post Office. For recorded fire updates, you can dial 565-3341, then press 9, then 4, then 3. And, of course, you can always call me at 565-3703 if you have specific questions. I would be happy to talk with you.

In the survey, 85% responded that they believe that one of the most important fire management objectives is notifying local residents about activities. I look forward to being your partner as we achieve this goal. This letter is my commitment to you.

Sincerely,

Jody Lyle
Fire Information Officer

Enclosures: 1. Prescribed burn project map
 2. Survey results